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Overburdened white men (and women): ruptured self-images of young Swiss in the "Third World" (1940s to 1970s)

Hongler, Patricia ; Lienhard, Marina

Abstract: 'You're young … and perhaps your life here in Switzerland doesn't satisfy you entirely? In Africa and Asia there is need for you.'1 These words were published in a brochure by the Swiss Confederation in the late 1960s and aimed to motivate young Swiss to work as volunteers in the field of development aid. They combined the notion of 'developing countries' being in desperate need of Western aid with the idea of young people's zest for action. In this article we wish to further explore the connections between these two concepts. Utilizing two case studies, we scrutinize the experiences of young Swiss men and women who, between the 1940s and the 1970s, spent short or longer periods of time in (former) European colonies, working for transnational companies or in development aid. We focus on how these young people dealt with colonialism, decolonization and the idea of development, and examine how their practices corresponded with the discourses and institutions they were confronted with.

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EDITED BY
PATRICIA PURTSCHERT
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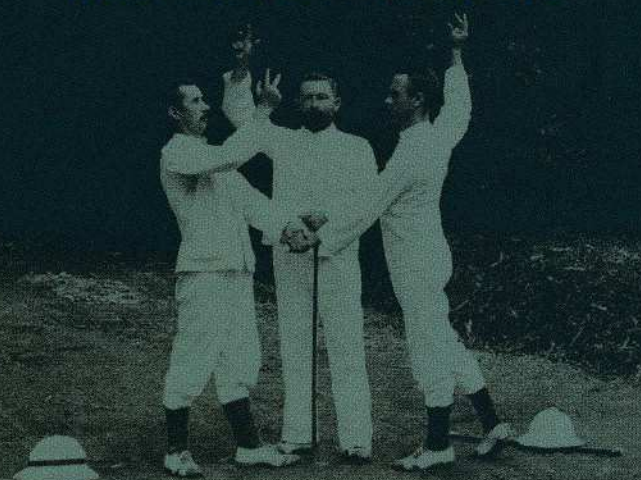

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Colonial Switzerland

Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins

Edited by

Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné
ETH Zurich, Switzerland

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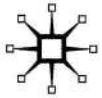

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Overburdened White Men (and Women)

Ruptured Self-Images of Young Swiss in the 'Third World', 1940s–1970s

Patricia Hongler and Marina Lienhard

'You're young ... and perhaps your life here in Switzerland doesn't satisfy you entirely? In Africa and Asia there is need for you.'[1] These words were published in a brochure by the Swiss Confederation in the late 1960s and aimed to motivate young Swiss to work as volunteers in the field of development aid. They combined the notion of 'developing countries' being in desperate need of Western aid with the idea of young people's zest for action. In this article we wish to further explore the connections between these two concepts. Utilizing two case studies, we scrutinize the experiences of young Swiss men and women who, between the 1940s and the 1970s, spent short or longer periods of time in (former) European colonies, working for transnational companies or in development aid. We focus on how these young people dealt with colonialism, decolonization and the idea of development, and examine how their practices corresponded with the discourses and institutions they were confronted with.

The first case study deals with graduates of the Swiss Tropical School (Schweizerische Tropenschule) in Basel. This institution was founded in 1943 to complement the academically oriented Swiss Tropical Institute (Schweizerisches Tropeninstitut) with practical training opportunities; the School aimed to prepare its students for their work in the 'tropical' regions overseas. As employees of plantations or transnational companies, graduates of the Tropical School often directly participated in colonial practices and discourses and therefore comprised an integral part of the colonial hierarchy of power. Correspondence between the School administration and emigrated graduates proffers critical insights into how the student's self-perceptions were constituted and remodelled from the 1940s to the 1970s.

The second case study focuses on the above-mentioned voluntary service coordinated by the Swiss Confederation, by means of which several hundred individuals were sent to the African continent between 1964 and 1974. Modelled on the American Peace Corps, the Swiss Volunteers for Development Aid were to pass on their professional expertise to their

African counterparts, operating on the principles of equality and partnership. An analysis of the biweekly bulletin *Entre nous*, which published the volunteers' reports as well as articles by the service's directors, illustrates how the notion of the 'ideal volunteer' affected the daily lives of young Swiss in Africa.

The following discussion is divided into two main sections, one addressing each case study. These sections are each further separated into two parts. In each first part we examine the ideals and self-perceptions that lay behind the young Swiss people's commitment to work in the 'Third World'.[2] Using the concept of othering from postcolonial theory, we ask how their self-images were built by creating differences from racialized 'others'. The figure of the 'white man' is of particular importance for this analysis. In colonial discourse, it embodied a Western rationality from which the female and the 'non-white' subject deviated in different ways. The white man's superiority led to a special responsibility, as Maria Eriksson Baaz explains in her study of the self-perceptions and practices of development workers: 'It was the backwardness of the colonized and the position of the colonizer in the top position on the evolutionary ladder that legitimized "the white man's burden" – to civilize and develop the underdeveloped.'[3]

The topos of the 'white man's burden' originates from British colonialism and was linked to the idea of a European civilizing mission towards the rest of the world.[4] However, this concept persisted after the formal end of European colonialism,[5] and – as we wish to show in this article – it was also effective in a Swiss context.[6] Historical scholarship has demonstrated that Swiss missionaries, businessmen or housewives often were an integral part of various colonial societies. They were affected by colonialism and its ideology and involved in its everyday reality.[7] Further, as Lukas Zürcher and Sara Elmer have recently argued, Swiss men and women were active not only in colonial but also in postcolonial societies, especially in the field of development aid.[8] Therefore, in the second part of each of the two sections, we show how the colonial figure of the 'white man' affected young people's everyday lives in the colonies or in the so-called developing countries, and investigate how they came to terms with the ensuing contradictions and conflicts. We argue that the problems experienced by the young men and women led to ruptures in their self-images. Results from the two case studies will then be brought together, allowing for scrutiny of their differences and similarities.

The Swiss Tropical School

The Swiss Tropical School was founded to provide young Swiss men and women[9] with the knowledge required for employment in the Tropics. More specifically, this meant preparing its pupils for occupations as plantation assistants, sugar chemists or traders for international companies.[10] In this

context, 'the Tropics' generally meant countries with a tropical climate and vegetation that required a specific kind of agriculture. In practice, however, the term was often used synonymously with 'overseas'. After completing the curriculum, most students sought employment in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as in eastern and southern Africa.[11] Tanganyika was their most popular destination.[12] The Tropical School operated until 1981, becoming increasingly centred on agricultural development aid from the mid-1960s onwards.[13]

The establishment of the Tropical School and the Tropical Institute during World War II expressed the hope of the Swiss Confederation to strengthen its international trade relations outside Europe and to conquer new markets that would be little affected by the war. Moreover, the education provided by the Tropical School sought to enable young Swiss to find employment overseas, addressing the threat of a potential unemployment crisis after the war.[14]

The founder's desire to benefit economically and politically from Switzerland having been relatively unaffected by the war was expressed by Frederik Rohn, a Dutch expert in sugar production and a teacher at the Minerva School in Basel, in his call for the foundation of a Swiss Tropical School in 1943:

> The countries that are now at war will scarcely have young, fresh work forces left to exploit the tropical production facilities because their number has been heavily reduced by the war and because they are desperately needed in their homeland for the reconstruction. Switzerland, on the other hand, will have a surplus of young labourers. Therefore it would be fitting to start training the enterprising sector of Swiss youth for one of the many occupations overseas.[15]

Rohn's statement, much like the one in the brochure of the Swiss Confederation quoted at the very beginning of our article, connects the need for fields of activity for Swiss youth with an external demand for Swiss expertise and labour. As we will show, this entanglement of a desire for economic profit with a duty to help was taken up by the media as well as by the students themselves.

Ideals: Daring Men of Action

In the writings of the Tropical School and in its portrayal in the media one element was always foregrounded: the need for the prospective students to have a 'good' or 'strong' character comprising specific traits such as self-restraint, diligence and a spirit of enterprise. As Ann Laura Stoler has highlighted, the category of 'character' replaced that of 'race' and 'class' in colonial discourse but was at the same time 'essentially constructed out of a cultural consensus on "European-ness"'.[16] Since the origins of the Swiss

Confederation lie in the liberal revolution of 1848, liberal ideology has been very important for Switzerland's self-perception and self-presentation. The notion of the citizen as a free individual, who must also fulfil civic duties, is thus an integral part of the Swiss self-image.[17] We argue that the ideal character of the Swiss Tropical School student and emigrant was essentially constructed out of a cultural consensus on 'Swiss-ness', which was intertwined with a notion of the 'liberal citizen'. The ideal emigrant was thus imagined as the ideal Swiss citizen: an enterprising male individual with a strong sense of civic duty.

'Every Swiss who sets out to the Tropics has to do his country honour as a human being and as a personality.'[18] This extract from a newspaper article of 1945 discloses how emigration was conceptualized as an act of national representation or ambassadorship. When a Tropical School alumnus began a new life in the Tropics it was not just his personal success that was at stake, but also that of his native country. This needs to be understood in a wider context. For the founders of the Tropical School, the School's role was evidently to foster economic and cultural exchange between Switzerland and the Tropics. By sending young Swiss workers to the Tropics, it believed that Switzerland was fulfilling its 'duty' in the 'civilizing mission'.[19] Therefore, Tropical School students were perceived as exemplary citizens who exported Swiss ideals by perpetuating accepted behaviours. It is comprehensible, then, that the desired qualities of the ideal Tropical School student comprised those character traits that were considered to be typically Swiss, such as diligence, modesty, adaptability, self-discipline, conscientiousness, entrepreneurial spirit and courage.

This view was propagated by Frederik Rohn in a newspaper article from 1954: 'a weak man will inevitably perish, and only he who can be an example to his inferiors and has authority will succeed. Often these young men have to supervise hundreds of natives; they carry the responsibility for the plantation that has been committed to them.'[20] This quotation discloses how the working relationship of the prospective emigrants was envisioned not only as one between superior and inferior, but also to a certain extent as one between teacher and pupil or parent and child.

The proclaiming of the need for a 'good' character and of the emigrants' duty as role models was usually paired with a warning against the danger of succumbing to illusions. 'Deceptive illusions are always dangerous. Life in the Tropics requires a great deal of sacrifice, self-discipline and adaptability from every young person who wants to set out',[21] a journalist wrote in a newspaper article about the opening of the Tropical School. This kind of warning points to a rivalling discourse from which the Tropical School wanted to distance itself. This is illustrated by the following quotation from a 1955 newspaper article on the Tropical Institute and the Tropical School:

> The times in which one could just put a handkerchief in one pocket, an army knife in the other, and would take the walking-stick and claim:

> 'Well, now I'm going to Africa!' and then do so, are over. Africa and the other tropical countries now need people who are very capable. You can't trade a box of green soap for a property of thousands of square kilometres with a built-in diamond mine, an ostrich farm, a palm oil plantation and a complete wildlife stock any more. Better-placed negro chiefs now have a subscription to *The Times* and *Life* and organize the order of the day of their harem with a Rolex Oister. Nowadays a successful stay in the Tropics needs to be well prepared.[22]

Here, the contemporary requirements of Tropical School students to be capable and well prepared are contrasted with an imaginary past in which apparently those same qualities were superfluous. At that time, only an adventurous spirit and quick wit were required to be successful in the Tropics. The imagined past is in fact a colonial fantasy, in which the 'native' subjects are passive and foolish and their land is a *terra nullius* ready to be grabbed by European 'pioneers'.[23]

It becomes quite clear that the 'illusions' against which the students of the Tropical School were being warned are in fact colonial imaginings drawn from popular culture, such as travel logs, adventure books, movies, magazines and newspapers. The figure that the Tropical School was trying to reject was that of the colonial pioneer, or 'imperial patriarch', a term that Lora Wildenthal uses to describe the first generation of German settlers in South-West Africa.[24] These settlers had become rich by seizure of lands, and viewed themselves as 'pioneers' whose supremacy was legitimized socially as well as 'racially'. Yet a Tropical School alumnus was to succeed in the Tropics according to the ideal of the liberal citizen by working hard and applying himself or herself. Climbing the social ladder by migrating to the Tropics was not ruled out categorically, but it had to be 'earned'. The rebuttal of these 'illusions' allowed the Tropical School to legitimize itself as well as to explain the potential failures of its alumni.

Ruptures: Dealing with Decolonization

Many Tropical School students described emigrating as a liberating experience. Being 'white' and European, they were able to profit both materially and in terms of prestige from the colonial order, or rather the 'racial dividend', and were often able to live comfortably, which meant a social advancement compared with their position in Switzerland.[25]

Alumni described their relationship to 'non-whites' almost exclusively as a hierarchically organized working relationship in which the Swiss were the superiors.[26] The racist discourse and the working hierarchy were interrelated and mutually legitimizing. A good relationship with 'non-white' labourers was one that respected this hierarchy, as exemplified in a School bulletin report by René Prack, a former Tropical School student. He wrote about his situation in Angola in 1959:

> All of the black labourers sought employment voluntarily and are being trained severely and forcefully to work. It was possible to more than double their performance within one year – of course without raising their salary. This is primarily a result of the personality of the plantation manager; he has to know how to assert himself against griping and passive resistance.[27]

Prack describes a positive working relationship. It is voluntary – this fact needs to be stressed because forced labour was quite common in Angola in the 1950s;[28] productive – this apparently means hard work for a low wage; and educative. The Angolans in this narrative need to learn how to work, and especially how to work efficiently. The 'white' plantation manager takes on an educative role.

As in the previous quotation by Rohn, Prack describes the power divide between employer and employee as a teacher–pupil or parent–child relationship. This analogy is quite frequent in the accounts of the former Tropical School students. As testified by a wide range of historical studies informed by postcolonial theory, the degrading of 'non-whites' to pupils or children was an important element of colonial discourse, as it served to legitimize the presence of the 'whites' in the colonies as well as to affirm their supremacy.[29] Another aspect of the colonial discourse apparent in Prack's account and in many others is the 'myth of the lazy native'.[30] By stressing the laziness, refusal to work and sluggishness or incapability of 'non-whites', the former Tropical School students were able to distinguish themselves and verify their own work ethic. This trope also legitimized the degrading of 'non-whites' and subsequently their 'education'.

Thus the images drawn by the Tropical School graduates for themselves and for their 'non-white' collaborators were connected in many ways to colonial discourses. In the course of decolonization, however, the self-perceptions and expectations of the former Tropical School students began to be challenged. Anti-colonialist movements, strikes and the changing employment policies of European companies in the (former) colonies undermined the colonial order and questioned 'white' supremacy. 'Non-white' labourers no longer complied with the idea of helpless and educable children. The émigrés now often described them as self-confident, organized, violent and threatening.

In a letter to the secretary of the Tropical School dating from 1958, Fridolin Müller[31] wrote about the situation in Guinea: 'The mentality of the natives has changed appreciably in line with all of it [Guinea's independence]. One morning while I was checking the previous day's labour, I was attacked by more than 15 workers and beaten black and blue. This story upset all of Guinea.'[32] He went on to argue that since the 'natives' were using 'paltry methods'[33] to force the planters to leave the country, they were clearly not yet 'capable' of independence. He summed up his pessimistic

view of the situation by describing Guinea as somehow lost in time: 'It was too soon. And now one starts to realize that Europeans are necessary and essential if any good is to come of it. But now I think it's too late.'[34] Müller's letter reads like a lament from a mortified parent. He cannot understand why the Guineans do not realize that they are dependent on the Europeans. Like many other former Tropical School students, Müller interprets decolonization within the framework of the aforementioned parent–child relation between 'whites' and 'non-whites'. The emancipation of 'non-whites' was seen as comparable to the premature detachment of an ungrateful child from its parent. While the émigrés often described the proceedings from the perspective of a third observing party, for most of the time they sided with the respective colonial powers. In view of the fact that they were invested in the colonial project both ideologically and practically, this is not necessarily surprising: their own privileged position was put in danger, and their worldview was interrogated by the shattering of the colonial order.

The primary reaction to this agitation was frustration and nostalgia. Fridolin Müller, for example, regretted the loss of an imaginary past in which 'white' supremacy was unchallenged and hierarchies were well defined. In his letter he compared what he saw as Guinea's sudden independence to a tropical storm. 'Things here change as quickly as the weather', he wrote, and he went on to declare that Guinea's independence 'threatens to destroy the paradise so wonderfully built up mainly by the planters'. Implicit in Müller's statements are echoes of 'imperial nostalgia'. This term was developed by various scholars during the decolonization process to describe a phenomenon emerging at the time: 'something that arose in the context of a perceived erosion of old geopolitical hierarchies, spatial borders, social boundaries, and lines of identity'.[35] Imperial nostalgia is a supra-individual, structural sentiment that can be evoked by individuals.[36] As Stuart Tannock has expressed in a different context: 'Nostalgic individuals may [...], in the face of an unstable present, long to return to a stable past – a past in which everything is held in its "proper" place [...].'[37]

Fridolin Müller depicts a paradisiacal past, which is now lost because of Guinea's independence. The Tropics have long been perceived as a bountiful paradise that can be freely exploited and populated by primitive peoples who live in harmony with nature. However, conversely, the pristine beauty of the tropical landscape was also perceived as treacherous, since behind its heavenly façade lay, supposedly, dangerous wildlife and a perilous climate, as well as an irrational, violent and promiscuous population.[38] Müller's letter evokes both of these images of the Tropics by placing the first in the colonial past and the second in the present as a result of a metaphorical change in climate.

The adherence to the colonial project, as well as its retrospective glorification exemplified by Müller's account, faded with time. Starting in the 1960s, more and more former Tropical students began to question colonial racism

and to distance themselves from the former colonial powers, establishing a sort of 'middle ground'. This coincided with the repositioning of the Tropical School as an institution providing education for potential development workers during the 1960s and more explicitly with its reorganization in the 1970s. The development paradigm that was taken by the School as well as by its alumni provided a structure in which decolonization and the emancipation of 'non-whites' was desirable while at the same time enabling a new kind of 'white' supremacy – that of the benevolent development worker.

Swiss Volunteers for Development Aid

The founding of a voluntary service in 1964 was one of Switzerland's first official endeavours in development aid.[39] A Service for Technical Cooperation had been established only three years earlier.[40] The creation of a state-run volunteer service was inspired by the American Peace Corps and fitted well with approaches taken by other countries at this time.[41]

Between 1964 and 1974, several hundred young Swiss were sent as volunteers to the African continent. Detailed figures are available only for the first five years of the service, and reveal that 163 missions took place between 1964 and 1969. The volunteers' average age was 25.4 years, 21 being the minimum age. Most of the missions took place in Dahomey, known today as Benin. Rwanda and Cameroon were also important destinations. The remaining volunteers went to the Central African Republic, Chad, Tunisia, Tanzania, Niger, Madagascar and Senegal.[42]

Many volunteers – nearly exclusively women – worked in community development. Other fields of activity were construction and education, and there were also volunteers working as nurses, administrators, foresters or craftsmen and craftswomen. Over one third of the volunteers were married at the time of their mission.[43] Swiss gender roles strongly influenced their lives in the 'Third World', as the husband's position was seen as the decisive one by the service's directors.[44] However, many unmarried women also chose to work as volunteers. Overall, more than half of the volunteers were female.[45] This high percentage can partially be explained by the fact that other terms of employment – for instance those of an official development expert – were hardly perceived as possible for Swiss women in the 1960s.[46]

Ideals: Between Brotherhood and Paternalism

The main idea behind the Swiss Voluntary Service was that the volunteers' simple lifestyle would enable them to establish a special relationship with the 'to-be-developed' Africans. An idealistic willingness to make a financial sacrifice and lead a modest life was seen as the key factor in differentiating a volunteer's activities from other forms of development work.[47] The

volunteers were supposed to mingle with the locals and to act as role models.[48] For this, a renunciation of the 'infamous colonialist privileges of the Europeans'[49] seemed to be an important precondition. This was noted in 1964 by the Delegate for Technical Cooperation, August R. Lindt: 'For a long time the Africans have only known the European superordinate to them. In the volunteer they get to know the European who emphasizes the "together" and the "side by side".'[50] The volunteers were expected to act in a different way from the former colonialists, by following the principle of partnership. This, however, was not easy to achieve, as the head of the volunteer section, Thomas Raeber, explained in 1967: '[D]evelopment work can only be successful through an attitude of complete human equality, a complete decomposition of the superiority of the "white man" by the "white man" himself.'[51] In this quotation a contradiction becomes apparent. At the heart of the concept of the Swiss Voluntary Service was an explicit refusal of colonialism and Western superiority. Ironically, human equality was to be achieved by an act of renunciation. For this, the figure of the 'white man' had to be overcome by the 'white man' himself. This also affected the question of what the volunteers' lives in the 'Third World' should look like. Should they 'live like the natives – in mud huts if necessary?'[52] Or should they, in order to maintain their authority, live a 'more developed life' than the native population?[53] The answer given by the service's directors was a tentative one: 'When considering all this, one will arrive at the attitude of an elder brother, the only approach to make successful work possible.'[54]

Again, a fundamental contradiction in the concept of the Swiss Voluntary Service becomes apparent. Despite the rhetoric of partnership, the idea of a natural divide between developed givers and undeveloped (or underdeveloped) recipients of aid persisted. Volunteers had to renounce their usual lifestyle in order to narrow this divide. But as the transfer of knowledge and values was still understood as only unidirectional, a certain asymmetry had to remain. The image of the 'elder brother' offered a good solution, as it stressed the strong bond of trust between volunteers and locals, and helped to gloss over the paternalistic idea of one-way help.[55]

What also becomes clear when considering the image of the 'elder brother' – who, as a figure, was supposed to replace the 'white man' – is that the ideal volunteer was imagined as being male, despite the fact that the majority of the volunteers were female. During their missions, female volunteers usually worked with women and male volunteers with men. Swiss concepts of femininity or masculinity were simply applied to the target population. For instance, African women were taught lessons in cooking and sewing and were imagined in a housewife's role: 'The housewife who wants to cook or dress her children nicely needs money, whether she lives in Switzerland or in the north of Dahomey',[56] an article in *Entre nous* by the voluntary service's directors stated.[57] Apparently, the gender category helped to emphasize the equality between givers and receivers. Yet the 'ideal volunteer' demanded an ability to aid across the gender line. Here, colonial notions of race and gender were intersected.[58] In a colonial logic, the 'black man' would have been further degraded when receiving aid from a 'white woman'; this aid relationship would have emphasized racial difference and the inequality produced by the act of aid.

Volunteers dealt differently with the contradictory ideals created for them at the Service for Technical Cooperation. But in every case, these ideals had repercussions on the volunteers' everyday lives and influenced encounters with their African and non-African counterparts, colleagues and students. These relationships were often discussed in the volunteers' reports. Stereotypical Swiss values such as modesty, industriousness and perseverance served as points of reference to differentiate the volunteers' own presence in Africa from that of other nationals.[59] For instance, a volunteer who was working in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, wrote in her report:

> Kigali is a bad place for volunteers. There are too many white people here. There is a local neighbourhood and a neighbourhood for Europeans. Its generally very difficult to reach black people [...]. The Rwandese are likeable but very reserved. Also for them we are simply Umusungus (rich people) from whom you can steal a little. They will never understand that we, the Swiss volunteers, can barely afford some cheese. Our black secretary didn't want to believe that I can cook. When I explained that there are no 'boys' in Switzerland she was really taken aback. It must be said that black people have never seen a white woman working in a household.[60]

For this volunteer her modest lifestyle was an important part of her self-perception. She saw herself as different from other 'white people' in Rwanda, and especially from other 'white women'. The fact that her Rwandese counterparts did not share this view dissatisfied her.

Descriptions of 'the Africans' provide further insights into the volunteers' self-perception. For example, African pupils were often referred to as being dim-witted; typically, this was contrasted with the professed patience and understanding of the volunteers instructing them.[61] Generally, Africans were described in a very standardized way that sat well with colonial notions of 'non-whites' that we described in the previous section of this article. It was thought that they possessed characteristics that inhibited the learning process; further, Africans were often described as being work-shy, while at the same time, a Western work ethic was a central element in the volunteers' self-perception.[62] Africans were also portrayed as child-like: for example the enthusiasm of villagers for a gardening project would be compared to that of children on their birthday.[63] By making such statements, the volunteers claimed for themselves the rationality they denied to their African counterparts. The descriptions also legitimized an educational

approach, as the following piece from a report on community development in Chad illustrates: 'At the beginning they were all sitting on the ground. Now we have at least managed that they bring a mat or a stool. Whoever comes without one doesn't get the work. The next lesson will be: "Washing the hands"!'[64] Development work is here understood as educational work. The villagers' behaviour and habits were to be transformed by disciplinary measures. Another volunteer presented himself as a severe mentor: 'To keep this business working one must [...] work with the whip. One has to dictate to the African a pace of work completely unknown to him.'[65] Thus the volunteers' reports show that the young Swiss often embraced the idea of Western superiority that persisted in the ideal of the voluntary service. As the next section will show, however, their self-perception was also subject to considerable doubt.

Ruptures: Who Was Actually Helping Whom?

The disparaging othering in the volunteers' reports may have been a way to deal with opposition and conflict. Such problems were prevalent, as the volunteers were not always met with enthusiasm for their visions and projects. Particularly in community development projects the volunteers were confronted with resistance; their aid was often rejected, and perhaps not even perceived as such. 'They simply laugh in our faces when we tell them to add an egg to their soup and to give cow's milk to the children who are not being breastfed any more',[66] a volunteer stated. These incredulous reactions frustrated her, as she was convinced that 'a balanced diet is one of the most important things that have to be established'.[67]

In particular, the cooperation between volunteers and their African counterparts was subject to conflicts. In September 1966, a volunteer working as a midwife in Dahomey described her situation as follows. To assist her in her work, she had chosen the woman who had been in charge of births before her arrival in the village. Her counterpart was supposed to inform her about upcoming births and to bring her the pregnant women for examination:

> But for the past two weeks she has asked me to pay her for this. I've explained her that she is doing the same work as before, just a little bit more correctly, and that it is for the village and not for me that she's doing it. She doesn't want to understand and tries to get me to pay her in every possible way. She refuses to inform me about the births and doesn't send the women for examination any more [...]. I can't take another woman instead of her because she is somehow the matron of the village and, what's more, she's the chief's wife.[68]

It becomes quite clear that the counterpart had more leverage in this relationship. Without her help the volunteer could not fulfil her duties. Apparently, the counterpart – who seemed to hold an important position of power in the village – had realized this and now asked for money for her cooperation. Perhaps she also wanted to be compensated for the additional workload. About a year later the same volunteer reported that the conflict had been aggravated. The counterpart was now sabotaging the volunteer's work openly by dissuading the villagers from giving birth under her supervision: 'And the matron has done all this to be sure that it's she herself who can provide care and get paid for it',[69] the volunteer wrote. It seems that the volunteer's free midwifery threatened the counterpart's activities. This example shows that the volunteers were immersed in existing power structures into which they had to assert themselves. They also threatened the areas of competence and sources of income of the people who had been in charge of the tasks before the volunteers' arrival, and who did not allow themselves to be cast out easily.

Some volunteers communicated their problems openly, as can be seen in the following report by a volunteer trying to improve the diet of children in the town of Koumra in Chad:

> You can't give eggs to the children, [because] if you do, they remain mute; women are not allowed to eat them, because they become infertile. It's difficult to fight customs like these and it needs a lot of skills and time. In sewing I've encountered a similar problem. [...] A pregnant woman mustn't prepare anything for her baby; it brings bad luck for the birth. For the same reason she must never say that she's pregnant.[70]

The women's habits are perceived as backward conventions; there is no scope for alternative explanations. This is a common pattern in the volunteers' reports. A lack of success was often explained in terms of the 'to-be-developed' being rooted too deeply in their former customs and superstitions.[71] Apparently, this colonial attitude was still a powerful resource for explanations. It presented resistance as passivity, backwardness or laziness. The principle of patience and the belief in the importance of the development idea were other important points of reference that helped the volunteers to manage feelings of failure.

However, the volunteers' confusion over the resistance they encountered is noticeable in their reports. And as time went by, many noticed that the villagers' lack of enthusiasm for development projects could be attributed not simply to laziness and backwardness but also to the workload they had to cope with in other fields.[72] A volunteer expressed another interesting thought in 1967:

> Again I've learnt that everything needs its time, in Africa even more than in Europe. When people are pushed too much to take part in the courses they think they are doing it for us, and they don't think that it's for themselves and that they can profit from it.[73]

Besides the usual reference to the patience needed in Africa, this extract also raises the important question as to who was actually helping whom in the described situations. It seems possible that some of the so-called 'receivers of help' simply participated in the volunteers' projects out of kindness. Maybe they even felt pity for the young Swiss. The following report of a volunteer's first impressions of a village in Dahomey gives an impressive account of the pressure and fears to which the volunteers were exposed:

> I violently suppressed a revolt in my stomach as I saw little children delightedly smack a shabby green pap, and I greeted countless people. Then I became quite nervous, not only because I never was quite sure how to answer the different welcoming questions, but also because I had to think all the time, WHAT if these people don't like me???[74]

This quotation expresses quite poignantly the human challenges with which volunteers were confronted. These young people not only had to find their way in an unknown environment, but also were expected to actively reconfigure it. For some, the implied contradictions did not pose a real problem. Yet, as we have shown, others reacted with authoritarian behaviour while still others experienced crises, moments of self-doubt or even feelings of failure.

In the early 1970s, the reports published in the volunteers' magazine *Entre nous* became increasingly critical. Many of the young Swiss engaged with the ideas of the emerging Third World Solidarity Movement.[75] They began to criticize the idea of unilateral help as being paternalistic, and also questioned the ideal of the modest and selfless volunteer.[76] The contradictions in the voluntary concept also became apparent to the service's directors. In August 1970 they announced that the whole concept of a state-run voluntary service had to be reconsidered.[77] Finally, in 1974, it was completely abandoned.[78]

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined how young Swiss who worked in the Global South perceived themselves, their mission and the local population before, during and after decolonization. To do this, we have focused upon two groups: (i) the graduates of the Swiss Tropical School and (ii) the volunteers from the official Swiss Voluntary Service.

There are some obvious differences between the two cases. The graduates worked in private enterprises like plantations or transnational companies, while the volunteers were engaged in development aid projects. This, as well as the crucial processes of decolonization that lay between the two cases, led to different ways of dealing with race and racism. Particularly in the early days of the Tropical School, racism was an integral part of the former

students' accounts and self-positioning. In the case of the Swiss volunteers, racism was explicitly dismissed on a rhetorical level. Nevertheless, there are also multiple parallels between the two examples. First of all, in both instances it seemed absolutely indisputable that young Swiss were entitled to live in the 'Third World' and to play an active role there. It was also clear that they were to do so within a broader Western context. Graduates and volunteers worked closely with other Europeans and were part of the 'white' community in the 'Third World'.

Interestingly, however, both ideals also included a dissociation from colonial discourse, and these worked in a similar way. This shift can be explained by the youth of the actors involved. On account of their age, they were supposed to act differently from their predecessors. The graduates, for instance, were warned not to expect the easy way of life of former colonialists. The volunteers, on the other hand, had to actively renounce a luxury or colonial lifestyle. These values of modesty and a good work ethic can be described as stereotypically Swiss. On a rhetorical level, they also permitted the differentiation of the Swiss presence in the 'Third World' from a broader European or colonial project without uncoupling it completely. It is important to remember, however, that the lives of both the graduates and the volunteers were still privileged when compared with those of the bulk of the local population.

Graduates and volunteers both engaged strongly with the ideals that were created for them. Their writings clearly illustrate a perception of superiority over their 'non-white' pupils and colleagues. Most young Swiss understood themselves as being the 'ones in the know' who could act as role models and exert disciplinary measures. This seemed true, regardless of their youth or their immersion in an unfamiliar environment. When their writings are subjected to closer scrutiny, however, it becomes apparent that the young people's experiences in the 'Third World' were not always compatible with their self-perceptions. At least some graduates had to accept that people in the 'Tropics' were not the docile colonial subjects they had expected. According to new discursive orders of the early 1960s, some graduates turned their attention towards development aid, where they found a new frame of reference and self-positioning. The idea of development aid introduced a new mode of orientation and allowed for a rhetorical turn away from colonialism. Nevertheless, it also simultaneously re-established a colonial worldview, as the case of the Swiss Voluntary Service shows. Westerners were supposed to bring knowledge and aid; the 'underdeveloped others' were supposed to learn and receive. For the Swiss volunteers, this idea was combined with a contradictory ideal of equality and partnership – a paradox that instigated conflicts in the young people's everyday realities and caused ruptures in their self-images. In the early 1970s, many aid workers began to search for new explanations and found them in the ideas of Third World Solidarity.

To conclude, these two case studies have illustrated that for the building of young Swiss expatriates' self-perceptions, colonialism served as a foil for differentiation and, at the same time, as the most important point of reference. The colonial figure of the 'white man', who takes on the burden of civilizing or developing the 'others', was the basis for their lives in the 'Third World'. What the writings of the young Swiss reveal, however, are overburdened men and women whose assumed superiority was heavily challenged by the complex realities with which they were confronted on an everyday basis.

Notes

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1. Brochure, Swiss Federal Archives (Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, henceforth BAR), CH-BAR E2200.83B#1990/26#192*, Freiwilligendienst Schweiz-Tansania, 771.26.0. All quotations from documents of the Swiss Tropical School and the Swiss Voluntary Service have been translated by the authors from German or French.
2. By the term 'Third World' we refer to a constructed, imaginary space, similar to the one known today as the 'Global South'. In the 1950s this consisted of European colonies, and after decolonization it was made up of what were now called 'developing countries'. The term is not commonly used in the sources we are working with. We believe, however, that it conveys well the idea of a homogenous space, continuously open for Western intervention, that is under scrutiny here.
3. Maria Eriksson Baaz (2005: 37).
4. See Boris Barth and Jürgen Osterhammel (2005) and Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann (2004).
5. See Barbara Heron (2007) and Philipp H. Lepenies (2009: 34–59).
6. See Patricia Purtschert (2008) and Patricia Purtschert, Barbara Lüthi and Francesca Falk (2012).
7. See Patrick Harries (2007), René Lenzin (1999) and Andreas Zangger (2011).
8. See Lukas Zürcher (2014a) and Sara Elmer (2014: 45–73).
9. There were far fewer women than men enrolled in the Tropical School, and unfortunately in our research we did not come across any letters from former female students containing detailed accounts of experiences abroad.
10. The latter branch of study was cancelled in 1947 because of a lack of applicants.
11. Statistics from 1979 indicate that between 33 and 49 per cent of the Tropical School alumni never left Switzerland. See letter from Thierry Freyvogel, 19 October 1979, Basel, Archives of the Swiss Tropical Institute (Archiv des Schweizerischen Tropeninstituts, henceforth ASTI), supplement 4.
12. See ibid. and 'Liste der bis jetzt eingegangenen Adressen von ehemaligen Tropenschülern im Ausland', June 1956, ASTI.
13. It was then replaced by the Technikum for Tropical Agriculture (Technikum für Tropische Landwirtschaft), which operated until 1989. A course in 'international agriculture' was offered subsequently at the Swiss Engineering School for Agriculture (Schweizerische Ingenieurschule für Landwirtschaft).
14. See Frederik Rohn, 'Zur Gründung einer Schweizerischen Tropenschule in Basel', 19 June 1943, State Archives, Canton of Basel-Stadt (Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt, henceforth StABS), ED-REG 1c 190-2-5, and Lukas Meier (2007: 35–9).
15. Rohn, 'Zur Gründung einer Schweizerischen Tropenschule in Basel', 19 June 1943, StABS, ED-REG 1c 190-2-5.
16. Ann Laura Stoler (1989: 141).
17. See Manfred Hettling (1998: 227–64).
18. 'Vorbereitung für die Tropen ...', *Tages-Anzeiger*, 1 September 1945, ASTI.
19. See Rohn, 'Zur Gründung einer Schweizerischen Tropenschule in Basel', 19 June 1943, StABS, ED-REG 1c 190-2-5.
20. 'Wer in ein tropisches Land auswandern will, muss sich rechtzeitig dafür rüsten', *Schweizerische allgemeine Volks-Zeitung Zofingen*, 6 November 1954, ASTI.
21. 'Vorbereitung für die Tropen ...', *Tages-Anzeiger*, 1 September 1945, ASTI.
22. 'Das Tor zu den Tropen', *National-Zeitung*, 23 August 1955, ASTI.
23. It is interesting to note that the present, modern Africa is described as that same colonial fantasy – a harem under the rule of a 'negro chief' – which has been submerged by Western status symbols: US news magazines and a Swiss luxury watch. We thank Patricia Purtschert for pointing this out.
24. Lora Wildenthal (2001: 79–130).
25. Harald Fischer-Tiné (2008) coined the term to explain how poor and/or marginalized 'white men' were still able to profit from racist structures even though they did not adhere to hegemonic whiteness. The Tropical School students often came from a rural or working-class background.
26. This is further developed in Marina Lienhard (2015: 163–80).
27. René Prack, 'Ueber den Aufbau einer Pflanzung in Angola. Vortrag von Herrn René Prack gehalten am 12.1.1959 in der Tropenschule', *Mitteilungsblatt der Tropenschule des Schweizerischen Tropeninstituts*, 6 (1959): 3–7, at 7, ASTI.
28. See Linda M. Heywood (1988).
29. See for example David Spurr (1993) and Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992).
30. Syed Hussein Alatas (1977).
31. The name has been changed by the authors in order to grant anonymity.
32. Letter from Fridolin Müller to Ms Tschudin, 23 October 1958, ASTI.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. William Cunningham Bissell (2008: 216).
36. See Stuart Tannock (1995: 454).
37. Stuart Tannock (1995: 455).
38. See David Arnold (1996), David Arnold (2006) and Felix Driver (2004).
39. For a more detailed version of this case study see Patricia Hongler (2014: 75–98).
40. See Branka Fluri (1993: 382–93, at 385).
41. See Sabine Kraut (1993: 445–58). For a historical analysis of young development workers from West and East Germany see Hubertus Büschel (2009: 333–65).
42. In addition, there were also missions to Nepal, which have not been considered for this analysis.
43. See Eidgenössisches Politisches Departement (1969: 9–12).
44. See 'Ehefrauen im Freiwilligeneinsatz', *Entre nous*, 1971, no. 8 (20 July): 7–8. See also Lukas Zürcher (2014b: 19–44).
45. See Eidgenössisches Politisches Departement (1969: 9).
46. See Lukas Zürcher (2014a: 203).

47. See *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 33 (21 June): 4. On the importance of modesty as a value in Swiss society, see Manfred Hettling (1998: 227–64, at 257).
48. See 'Informationsschrift des DftZ', quoted in *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 39 (15 September): 1.
49. *Effort*, 4 (1964): 2.
50. *Effort*, 4 (1964): 3.
51. *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 43 (16 November): 2.
52. 'Haus oder Hütte', *Entre nous*, 1966, no. 15 (15 September): 2.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. See also Anne McClintock (1995: 44–5).
56. *Entre nous*, 1970, no. 7 (1 June): 7.
57. For similar findings concerning the Basel mission in pre- and early colonial Ghana see Ulrike Sill (2010).
58. On intersectionality see, for example, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) or Katharina Walgenbach (2012: 23–105).
59. For the importance of 'Swiss' values for Swiss development experts in Rwanda see Lukas Zürcher (2014a: 200–6).
60. *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 41 (13 October): 8.
61. See, for example, *Entre nous*, 1971, no. 1 (14 January): 2.
62. See, for example, *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 37 (16 August): 4.
63. See *Entre nous*, 1966, no. 10 (27 May): 5.
64. *Entre nous*, 1966, no. 21 (Christmas): 3.
65. *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 32 (8 June): 3.
66. *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 35 (24 July): 2.
67. Ibid.
68. *Entre nous*, 1966, no. 16 (23 September): 8.
69. *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 40 (1 October): 4–5.
70. *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 39 (15 September): 3.
71. See also *Entre nous*, 1968, no. 11 (4 June): 7–8.
72. See, for example, *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 41 (13 October): 2 or *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 30 (1 May): 3.
73. *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 32 (8 June): 2.
74. *Entre nous*, 1967, no. 30 (1 May): 3.
75. On the history of the Third World Solidarity Movement in Switzerland see Monica Kalt (2010) and Konrad Kuhn (2011).
76. See *Entre nous*, 1970, no. 7 (1 June): 19–20; *Entre nous*, 1970, no. 6 (29 April): 10–13.
77. See *Entre nous*, 1970, no. 10 (5 August): 2–4.
78. See 'Zukunft des schweizerischen Entwicklungshelferprogrammes', note, 26 June 1974, BAR, CH-BAR E2005#1985/101#814*, Freiwilligendienst Allgemeines, t.33.0.

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Part IV
(Post)colonial Politics and Counter-Politics